



## Legislative Council

30/10/2002

### Murray-Darling Basin Amendment Bill Hansard - Extract

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**The Hon. MELINDA PAVEY** [8.35 p.m.] (Inaugural speech): I speak for the first time in this Chamber. The Coalition does not oppose the Murray-Darling Basin Amendment Bill, which resulted from the corporatisation of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority in June this year. The bill brings the New South Wales Murray-Darling Basin Act 1992 into line with Commonwealth Acts, and gives legislative approval to the intergovernmental Murray-Darling Basin Amending Agreement. The initiative of investing in ways to use water more efficiently rather than resorting to the blunt instrument of taking water from irrigators, is a far better and more equitable solution for delivering environmental outcomes. I would encourage the Government to look more closely at how these measures can be applied across the whole of regional New South Wales.

Today I stand before honourable members as a woman, a wife, a mother, a daughter, a small business person and a country girl determined to do the very best for the people of regional, rural and coastal New South Wales. I stand here to represent the concerns, aspirations and needs of the people of New South Wales as effectively and as passionately as I am able. It has been an unexpected political journey, one that started 14 years ago and one that I did not suspect would ever have me delivering a maiden speech in this or any other Chamber. I am honoured to be here. However, I am sad that it is under these circumstances.

The Hon. Doug Moppett had so much more to give this Parliament and his family. I thank Helen and her sons for sharing Doug with the people of New South Wales for so long. I feel especially sad that she was not able to enjoy him to herself should he ever have retired. His place is one that I feel inadequate to fill, so I shall not attempt to take his place but to honour his memory. In preparing for my maiden speech, I read a number of members' speeches. However, the words that most touched me were the words of the man I stand here today to replace. In his maiden speech in 1976 Doug said:

I am quite aware that my meagre talents alone might seem to be insufficient to qualify me for admission to this place.

I think I know how Doug felt; it is also how I feel. It is a humbling experience. Doug and I are very different, and my contribution to this Chamber will be different. However, I want to honour his memory by treating this Chamber with the same level of respect, propriety and honour as he did. My first involvement with Doug involved honour, which is not a word often associated with politics. During the Independent Commission Against Corruption fiasco involving the North Coast land inquiries—when the media blowtorch was fiercely aimed at Wal Murray, my former boss, and when our party was under enormous pressure—Doug, as chairman of the party, visited Wal to discuss the options. It was decided that Wal should stay and fight on, and Doug stood 100 per cent rock solid beside him. Wal was vindicated and Doug's support was validated.

I also mention tonight that I am delighted to have been sworn in on the same day as Reverend the Hon. Dr Gordon Moyes, who has made a significant contribution to the wellbeing of those less fortunate than we are. The regard in which he is held by those not only in the church community but also in the wider community for his visionary management of the Wesley Mission is something to which we can all aspire. And he is a hard act to follow.

I am privileged to serve the people of New South Wales on behalf of the National Party—a party of great tradition and history. However, I am reminded of Mark Twain's words, "The report of my death was an exaggeration." There have been many obituaries written for the National Party but, despite the premature projections of our demise, the party remains strong, resourceful and relevant because its membership comprises people who share those same qualities.

We are small business people, we are farmers, we are doctors, we are nurses, accountants and public servants. We are families and we are regional Australia. We have real foundations in our communities and we are not a cynical marketing ploy. As with any party, we must evolve with the community to remain significant. Our party is doing that. I would like to think that the preselection of a 33-year-old businesswoman who, incidentally, also happened to be nine months pregnant, is indicative of our ability to grow and change with the times.

The National Party has also contributed to an historic moment in New South Wales political history. We are the first political party to achieve 50 per cent representation of women in the New South Wales Parliament. This has been done without quotas and with genuine grassroots endorsement. I am also proud to recognise the party's endorsement of Sue Vinnicombe in Tweed, Anne Thomas in Bathurst, and Marsha Isbister in Murray-Darling as candidates for the forthcoming State election. Their election to Parliament in March 2003 will complement the contributions of Katrina Hodgkinson in the other place and the Hon. Jennifer Gardiner, and will continue the tradition of strong women in our party standing up for our community, such as Wendy Machin, Judy Jakins, our Federal President, Helen Dickie, and the Federal member for Riverina, Kay Hull.

It is not always an easy path for us women. My former boss, Wal Murray, once said that he could not employ a female media officer—"What would they say?" Thankfully he was overruled by my friend and mentor Bryce Osmond. To give Wal credit, he was one of my greatest supporters during my preselection—maybe you can teach old dogs new tricks! I have had some great political teachers—the Hon. Wal Murray, Ian Armstrong, Wendy Machin, the Hon. Robert Webster and Matt Singleton. They are all very different people with different skills, yet their contributions are significant and long-lasting for the people New South Wales.

I hope to join the successful grassroots representation that the National Party is famous for. We are our communities and as members of our communities we stand proudly and passionately to demand the services and defend the rights of people whom we live with side by side. As members of Parliament the National Party has a louder, stronger voice, with more influence than our numbers suggest. We need to. We have a great land mass. Our population outside the metropolitan area is relatively small and it is vital to the quality of life of our constituents that we deliver. To the members of the party who have entrusted me with this role, I say I will proudly represent the values and beliefs of our party and defend the people of regional, rural and coastal New South Wales.

We are clearly products of our environment and upbringing. This is confirmed as I look around the Chamber tonight. I am the daughter of dairy farmers turned small business people, with a very strong work ethic based on the rights and responsibilities of the individual. Lee Rhiannon referred in her maiden speech to her pride in her family's political activism in the Communist Party. The Hon. Carmel Tebbutt described herself as being the product of a Catholic, working-class family and said that her identification with the Labor Party was in many ways a result of this background. Our heritage so clearly influences the values that we bring into this Chamber, and while we may differ in our philosophical approach I believe that we all enter here with the same goal. That is what parliamentary democracy is about, bringing together a range of people from different backgrounds to fight for what they believe is for the good of the people.

That is why I will be a passionate advocate of small business. I understand the challenges and the level of dedication required to run a successful business, whether it be a farm, a cafe or a bookstore. Small business in a competitive, globalised economy must constantly reinvent itself to stay ahead of the pack and, importantly, stay profitable. Whilst price is an important consideration for many consumers, there are a growing number who regard service and a commitment to excellence as important as pricing considerations. Small business has to fill the niche markets.

I also believe that the parliamentary party system is the best way to provide good government and deliver results to the people that Parliament seeks to represent. While the party system is far from perfect it is far better than having a Chamber of individual interests that serve only themselves. Independents cannot take our State forward. They can raise all the problems in the world but will not offer policies that will solve the problems they raise. Their inability to deliver for their communities on their own subordinates their loudly proclaimed principles to the highest bidder. They can never have control of the Treasury benches, they cannot contribute around the Cabinet table, and they can never become a Minister or a Premier. They are left to catch whatever bones the Government might throw them. The endorsement and support of pseudo Independents in regional New South Wales is mischievous and deceptive, and it may well be one that some live to regret.

More often than not the media portrayal of the parliamentary process undermines people's confidence in our system of government. While strong debate is vital to the success of the Westminster system, strong debate taken out of context can degenerate into the playground-like scenes depicted on the nightly news. Unfortunately, that is what the media picks up and it only compounds the cynicism the electorate feels for politicians and the political process. In turn, this is turning people off an interest in or an understanding of politics. How do you solve this? We can help to create a better understanding of the parliamentary process within the community. It is important that the community realises how lucky we are. We need to protect our system of democracy that allows us to disagree, to argue, to be criticised, and to be critical.

However, that freedom to question must also be reconciled with the fact that we have high living standards, education standards, health standards, and quality of life. That is not to say that we are a perfect society or that we should not aim to improve it, just that there are many aspects of our society that we need to celebrate and be proud of. Importantly, we are a society that is free to criticise without fear of retribution, and the past few weeks have reinforced our need to protect this.

The events in Bali struck at the core of our nation. This is the first time that many of my generation have been attacked so close to home. Our sense of fun and spirit, as the people prepared to embrace other cultures and countries, has been jolted out of its innocence. Because of the freedom we experience in Australia, this attack is in stark contrast to our own experiences. I have faith that these events will not break the spirit of our young people and that the rite of passage that should be available to all young Australians—to put a backpack on our shoulders and explore the world—will continue and as a result we will continue to grow as a tolerant and multifaceted society.

The attack has also given me the opportunity to reflect on the contributions of our forebears who fought to protect freedom and liberty, which I suspect, up until a few weeks ago, we may have been taking for granted. I honour my grandfather, my grandmother, my great aunt and uncle and my father-in-law—an English Barnardo's orphan—for their sacrifices and their commitment to this country that has given us what we have today: peace, freedom, economic security, and a quality of life second to none. My family is in no way unique. Every family has grandparents, aunts and uncles who made similar sacrifices in war, and perhaps we may need to make those sacrifices again, but that is the price of maintaining freedom.

As parliamentarians we have an obligation to protect the vulnerable and the disadvantaged in the community. Our strength as a community comes from the strength in our families. We need to protect our families and our children and give them every opportunity to prosper and succeed. If our children are being hurt they need to be protected. It does not matter who they are or where they come from, they are the future of our communities and they deserve a future free of abuse. We have an obligation to ensure that they are protected.

In 1976 my predecessor, the Hon. Doug Moppett, spoke of his concern about the living standards of our Aboriginal population. Nearly 30 years later our record on improving the quality of life for these people is shameful. They are an important part of the National's constituency and we should not be scared to stand up for them in a loud and meaningful way. I do not profess to have the solutions but I believe that the path lies in self-respect and compassion, through employment, through opportunity, and through empowering them to develop their own solutions. We must not stand in the way of those wanting to help themselves. Solutions lie not in the big hand of government but in the small hand of the community.

If there is one thing I hope to achieve in this House it is to improve opportunities for those in regional New South Wales and to provide the incentive for our country kids to stay at home and to return home. There are already opportunities for our children to obtain excellent primary, secondary and tertiary education in the country if they so desire. Our responsibility is to ensure that there is a climate to encourage significant investment in our regional communities so that there are good jobs to stay for, but, if they do leave, there are also good jobs for them to come back to.

Technology is enabling more and more people to choose where they wish to work. If there is a choice between sitting in your office looking at the Pacific Ocean, or the Western Plains, or across a polluted high-rise skyline in downtown Sydney, more people will make that exodus. One of the greatest impediments to growth in regional New South Wales is talking down what our regional communities have to offer. I believe that regional development will truly accelerate when we can show the people of this city what they are actually missing out on. An unintended consequence of the publicity surrounding the effects of the drought is the negative perception created through visions of drought-ravaged land. The people who stay committed to the country, despite the hardship of drought, should remind us that there is so much reward in the country lifestyle and so much that you can miss out on inner-city.

There is a lot to miss out on in Sydney, or any other city, when you have to steel yourself for the trip home from work every day and when the average price of a nice home within reasonable distance from the CBD is more than half a million dollars. There is much talk about the overpopulation of the Sydney Basin but little action on developing real policies to move people out into the regions. In fact, some Sydney-driven policies are having a devastating impact on regional communities and are inhibiting growth investment in the regions. In the past decade country people have been through an enormous period of change, reform and readjustment. Basically, country people have borne the brunt of major reform and have done so admirably, but with a profound effect on their existence and way of life.

Yet despite all the sacrifices and readjustments, we continue to ask more of our communities in relation to water and native vegetation management reform. Farmers' rights and the basic tenet of freehold title are slowly being eaten away, which is having a profound effect on the value of farming land. The State Government this year was paid \$250 million by the Commonwealth in competition payments, and over the next four years it will receive about \$1 billion. It appears to me there is an obvious direction in the way the money should be flowing. As you get around country New South Wales, people do feel disillusioned, under threat and undervalued for the real contribution they have made and continue to make towards the State's economic prosperity. Coupled with our worst drought, things are pretty tough in the bush.

There is something wrong when we spend more money on making and administering new rules than we do on encouraging our land-holders to continue with the conservation of their land. We need to consider the wealth of knowledge that there is in our rural communities. They can tell us how to manage our land better as well. There are people who have had generations of experience in managing their lands, including hazard reduction and bushfire management.

Something is amiss when historic timber huts, built at the turn of the century, go up in flames because the land around them is not being prepared for the fire season. This has happened in recent times in the State's north. The management of these areas was helped until recently by the grazing of cattle, which reduced the fire load. These cattle have now been locked out of some areas, impacting on the lives of their owners and increasing the fire hazard. In these areas a way of life has been changed forever. It is time to stop treating private land-holders as environmental vandals and to work in partnership with them to improve land management practices. I raise these issues in my inaugural speech because I firmly believe that we are servants, not masters, of the people.

A growing issue on the North Coast is the demand and availability of rural subdivisions. While city people are free to have dual occupation of their quarter-acre blocks to maximise their investments, farmers on the most marginal of farming land are being stopped from realising that same potential. Families who have worked all their lives planning their superannuation by selling a parcel of land are being stopped by Sydney-centric policies—policies designed in Sydney by Sydney people on behalf of country people.

Current planning policies encourage the consolidation of existing urban areas by encouraging dual occupancy. They want to squeeze everyone into higher density living rather than allow approval to subdivide more rural land so people can enjoy a more peaceful, isolated existence. This is not what people living in our regional communities, or even those who want to relocate from the cities, want. If we wish to depopulate Sydney, we need to offer those wanting to move from high-density urban living a better option and more choices involving space and personal freedom. No-one wants another Gold Coast, especially local communities. But we also do not want the high-density urban areas that are being encouraged under current policies.

Economic prosperity and job opportunities can only happen in our regions on a sustained basis if we are encouraged and not stifled by the heavy hand of government. We must encourage investment not only on our land but in our towns to build stronger communities. We must continue the upgrade of the Pacific Highway to dual carriageway status and provide the necessary funding to speed up the bypass of towns and communities. At the same time we must dramatically improve transportation across the Blue Mountains to the Central West, delivering prosperity and development opportunities for Lithgow, Bathurst, Cowra, Blayney, Orange and Dubbo.

My presence in this Chamber would not be possible without the support of my husband, Warren, who could not be with us tonight because he is working at home and looking after our 3½-year-old. His support of my career and ambition is infinite, and I have so much respect for his wisdom, integrity and loyalty. My parents, Robyn and Ken Shaw—my mother is here—are also a part of that equation that makes it possible for us to raise our two young children, Jack and nine-weeks-old Emily. As I said, we are a product of our environment, and I hope the values, work ethic and decency of my parents are reflected in my contribution in this Chamber.

The decisions and choices I will make as a working mother are no different than those made by hundreds of thousands of women every day. I am blessed to have an equal partnership with my husband and the support of my parents to allow me to fulfil my ambitions without compromising my children. But it is the modern conundrum for every woman. Maternity leave is not the only issue. The problems and demands of parenting only increase as children get older. Family-friendly companies will reap the financial rewards of their commitment to their employees. I hope our workplaces can value the mother who may have to leave work to tend a sick child as much as we value a 14-hour workday.

The New South Wales Parliament has the opportunity to set a standard for the private sector. By the introduction of sitting hours in this place that better recognise

that making legislation at one o'clock in the morning is not good government, and by enabling our members, both male and female, to participate in normal family life, we create legislators who are more representative of their community. We all recognise that being a parliamentarian is not a nine-to-five job. But we also need to recognise that we are making decisions that affect many lives, and it is our responsibility to ensure that we make those decisions in the best possible environment. We need what has been called "family friendly sitting hours" in this Parliament, not only to ensure that more women from all generations are able to contribute to our democracy but also to ensure that we retain the skills of the people who support us—the staff of the Parliament and our own personal staff.

Before I finish I would like you to consider this. Imagine you have raised your children, sent them to school, and guaranteed them a better life. Imagine that you have milked your cows morning and night seven days a week for 30 years. Imagine that you are ready to retire. Imagine as you are about to retire that decisions are made by people you do not know that mean it costs more to produce the milk than you receive for it. Imagine that the land your dairy farm is on is 10 minutes from a major regional city. Despite how hard it is, you have a back-up plan that will see you through your retirement. You want to stay in your home, but you know someone will pay for the back paddock so they can also live a rural lifestyle. Now imagine being told that you cannot sell that back paddock because other people from Sydney that you have never met say you cannot.

That is what is happening in regional communities. If we are going to make our communities strong we need to trust them to know what is best for them, not impose on them decisions made by outsiders. I believe that we are servants of the people, that our responsibility is to ensure that the dairy farmer can reap the rewards of 30 years of hard work and contribution to his community. That is what I want to do in this job. I commend the bill to the House and I thank you for your indulgence.